



Writing Persuasive Letters of Recommendation
ADVICE FOR FACULTY

- 1) Write for students you know well. Say no if you cannot write a positive letter or if you cannot say much beyond the basics – GPA, scores, major activities, etc.
- 2) Avoid mega-adjectives (brilliant, amazing, dynamic...) that are not supported by specific examples.
- 3) Use a narrative voice: “Martha is also adept at assessing group dynamics – a stiff phrase but appropriate in describing her knack for getting a group, no matter how diverse, to meld together. I was particularly charmed by this ability when Martha and several Cambridge students were visiting at my house one day last winter. Martha thought it would be pleasant for the Cambridge students to visit with a typical American family. I am still not clear on why she chose mine, but she did. Late one evening after dinner, we were gathered around the table. My husband, and English faculty member who would prefer in most cases to be reading, was clearly beginning to feel restless. Our fourteen-year-old son was concentrating on looking as cool as possible and our ten-year old was displaying classic signs of too much sugar after dinner. All things considered, it was a fairly awkward situation, but soon Martha developed a plan. She enlisted our participation in a silly, but enjoyable card game called Spoons. Soon the Brits, the hyperactive, the hypercool, and the hypergrumpy Arkansas were all laughing, spoons were flying, and connections were being made. After the game ended, we settled in for a pleasant, relaxed evening that might not have occurred without Martha’s intervention.”
- 4) Provide examples. Compare the students to others you have known who have competed successfully for admission to that school or for a particular scholarship. Comment on the student’s role in class or program dynamics. Include quotations from student papers. Refer to a teacher who is not writing a letter of support but who may have a positive comment to add: “I am one of many teachers who admire Robert’s work. Dr. Moss, an AP lit teacher, enthusiastically described a research paper of his as thorough, meticulous, and creative. When another teacher heard about the paper topic, she recommended Henry Glassie’s important work *Material Culture* (2001). Robert was already plowing through the work by the end of the day.” Stress virtues not obvious from a transcript or resume.
- 5) Provide some sense of your own credentials. Be brief about yourself, but if you have been teaching for 10, 15, 20, 25 years, do include it. If this is the best student you have worked with in the last 5, 10, 15, 20, 25 years include that as well, but avoid ranking students in a given class. “This student had the third highest grade out of 25 talented students in my AP Chemistry class” may seem like a compliment, but it may actually hurt the student. The scholarship program may wonder why the other two did not apply.
- 6) Engage the reader with active verbs (achieved, administered, allocated, analyzed, arranged, assessed, assisted, balanced, budgeted, built, calculated, clarified, collected, compared, compiled, composed, computed, conducted, confronted, constructed, converted, conveyed, counseled, created, defined, delegated, demonstrated, designed, determined, developed, devised, diagnosed, directed, discovered, displayed, distributed, earned, edited, effected, encouraged, enforced, engineered, enlarged, enlightened, enlisted, established, estimated, evaluated, examined, facilitated, formed, founded, governed, grouped, guided, handled, headed, honored, implemented, improved, improvised, increased, indexed, informed, initiated, inspired, installed, integrated, investigated, led, linked, maintained, managed, mapped, mastered, mediated, moderated, motivated, navigated, negotiated, nominated, observed, operated, originated, overcame, participated, performed, persuaded, pioneered, planned predicted, prepared, presented, presided, produced, promoted, protected, questioned, reconciled, recorded, recruited, reorganized, researched, reviewed, revised, scheduled, served, shaped, simplified, solved, sorted, sparked, strengthened, supervised, trained, translated, unified, utilized, validated, verified).
- 7) Proofread carefully. Forgetting to change the name of the scholarship, the student, or the institution can be deadly.